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Report to the Sixty-Second Legislature Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program



Prepared by

The Wildlife Division
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UPLAND GAME BIRD ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM OVERVIEW

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

The 50th Montana State Legislature enacted SB 331 in 1987 establishing a pheasant enhancement program to be administered by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP). The statute specified that \$2 from each resident game bird license and resident sportsmen's license together with \$23 from each nonresident game bird license and nonresident combination license would be used to reimburse people releasing pheasants through the Upland game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP). Once sites were approved by FWP, birds were released into suitable habitat capable of supporting a viable pheasant population and where reasonable free public hunting is provided.

In 1989 the 51st Montana State Legislature enacted SB 33 to amend SB 331 (87-1-247, MCA). This statute added a provision to the original legislation authorizing unexpended funds remaining at the end of the fiscal year for use toward the development, enhancement, and conservation of upland game bird habitat in Montana. Habitat enhancement efforts as addressed in this statute provided assistance to landowners through cost-share programs, leases, and conservation easements to establish:

- Suitable nesting cover
- Winter cover and food plots
- Range management improvements
- Shelterbelt plantings

The 57th Montana State Legislature made several changes to the program in 2001 through passage of SB 304. This statute was enacted as, *"an act clarifying the scope of and revising funding criteria for the upland game bird habitat enhancement program; requiring that a percentage of available revenue be spent on the upland game bird release program; clarifying project eligibility criteria; amending sections 87-1-247, 87-1-248, and 87-1-249, MCA; and providing an effective date."*

Specific outcomes and recommendations from the 2009 Legislative Program Audit prompted further revisions to the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program. The

61st Montana State Legislature endorsed HB 499, *"an act revising laws related to the upland game bird enhancement program; establishing a citizens' advisory council; authorizing development of a strategic program plan; revising reporting requirements; amending sections 87-1-247 and 87-1-250, MCA; and providing an effective date."*

Highlights of HB 499 are detailed in the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Updates section.

EXPENDITURE REQUIREMENTS

Prior to the 61st Montana Legislature, Montana SB 304 identified spending requirements relative to administrative costs and the appropriation of funds required to be spent annually on activities related to upland game bird releases. More specifically, the statute limited spending on program administration to 15% revenue received during a given fiscal year. The statute also sets aside at least 15% of the funds collected under 87-1-246, MCA, for expenditures related to upland game bird releases (e.g., pheasant releases, wild turkey transplants, and emergency supplemental feeding) and requires 25% of these funds be spent on upland game bird releases (e.g., pheasant releases and wild turkey transplants) each fiscal year (87-1-247 MCA).

Expenditure requirements were revised through Montana HB 499, enacted in 2009. After funds are set aside for activities related to upland game bird releases, the statute requires that the remaining funds be available for upland bird habitat enhancement projects and program administration. Henceforth, the 15% administrative cap was removed from statute (87-1-247, MCA) beginning Fiscal Year 2010.

Other highlights of this statute as it pertains to 87-1-248, MCA, include:

- Projects funded by the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program cannot exceed \$200,000. Additionally, the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission must approve any UGBEP project that exceeds \$100,000.
- Purchases of equipment, land, and buildings are limited to \$25,000.
- Wells, pipelines, and roads may not be funded at more than 50% of their construction costs.

- Any equipment purchased with funds collected under 87-1-246, MCA, remains the property of the department.
- A shelterbelt may not be constructed within 400 feet of any residential building or building occupied by livestock.
- Funds collected under 87-1-246, MCA, may be expended for supplemental feeding programs that are authorized by the department.

MONTANA'S UPLAND GAME BIRDS

Montana is home to nine upland game bird species found in diverse habitats across the state that provide varying degrees of hunting opportunities. Habitat needs for five native upland game bird species and four exotic species are addressed through projects funded by the Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (UGBHEP).

Native species:

- Greater sage-grouse
- Sharp-tailed grouse
- Dusky grouse (Blue grouse)
- Spruce grouse (Franklin's grouse)
- Ruffed grouse

Exotic species:

- Ring-necked pheasants
- Gray partridges (Hungarian partridges)
- Merriam's turkeys
- Chukars

BIENNIAL REVENUE AND EXPENDITURES

Table 1 illustrates a breakdown of revenue and expenditures of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program as well as specific expenditure information related to statutory requirements.

Relative to previous administrative expenditures, FY 2010 administrative costs were consequently higher to account for the three newly hired UGBEP field biologists and the recently created UGBEP Advisory Council. In the previous biennium, administrative costs solely funded the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Coordinator's position and hired contractors, when applicable.

The UGBEP administrative expenditures include all costs attributable to the overall operation and implementation of the program, including personal services and operations costs. Examples of administrative costs include: salaries, benefits, vehicles for the three field biologists, computers, home offices – where applicable, professional development, and program advertising/publications. The 12-member council expenditures include daily honorariums, mileage and lodging costs, per-diem allowances, meeting room expenses, and administrative support.

Table 1. Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program revenue and spending: Fiscal years 2009 - 2010 (87-1-246 and 87-1-247, MCA).

Fiscal Year 2009	Upland Game Bird Release	Habitat Enhancement	Administration	Program Total
Revenue	\$107,172	\$500,112	\$107,172	\$714,456
Expenditures	\$161,269	\$241,910	\$100,635	\$503,814
Budget Rules¹	Minimum Expenditure: \$26,793			
Fiscal Year 2010	Upland Game Bird Release	Habitat Enhancement	Administration	Program Total
Revenue	\$104,900	\$594,403		\$699,303
Expenditures	\$124,410	\$203,478	\$261,645 ³	\$589,533
Budget Rules²	Minimum Expenditure: \$26,225			

¹MCA 87-1-247 (1-3): Per SB 304, not more than 15% of the money generated may be used for administrative purposes. 15% of funds collected must be set aside each fiscal year for expenditures related to upland game bird releases of which, at least 25% must be spent on upland game bird releases each fiscal year.

²MCA 87-1-247 (1-3): Per HB 499, 15% administrative cap was removed.

³Expenditures include \$39,915 administrative costs for the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Citizen Advisory Council (87-1-251, MCA).

BIENNIAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) administers the statewide Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP). The UGBEP is organized into two programs:

1. Upland Game Bird Release Program (Montana ARM 12.9.6)
2. Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (Montana ARM 12.9.7)

The principle outcomes of the UGBEP are pheasant and turkey releases; establishment or enhancement of upland game bird habitats; conservation of valuable game bird habitats; and enhanced public upland game bird hunting opportunities.

UPLAND GAME BIRD RELEASE PROGRAM

PHEASANT RELEASES

Participants in the pheasant release program may either raise or purchase birds for release. Local FWP biologists assess the potential release site for suitable habitat that provides released pheasants with sufficient woody and winter cover, nearby food sources, and idle cover (Figure 1). If the release site is on private land, the landowner must also agree to allow reasonable free public hunting. Tables 2 and 3 summarize pheasant releases for calendar years 2009 and 2010, respectively.



Figure 1. Pheasant release in Sheridan County.

Table 2. Summary of pheasant releases funded through the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program for calendar year 2009.

Region	# of Contracts	Pheasants Released	Acreage Open to Hunting	Estimated Hunter-Days
4	15	2,700	13,590	1,220
5	1	200	4,160	150
6	71	10,772	114,802	10,507
7	2	314	1,280	70
Total	89	13,986	133,832	11,947

Table 3. Summary of pheasant releases funded through the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program for calendar year 2010.

Region	# of Contracts	Pheasants Released	Acreage Open to Hunting	Estimated Hunter-Days
4	6	1,400	26,400	1,322
5	1	150	4,160	150
6	104	10,272	105,827	12,518
7	6	850	8,880	500
Total	117	12,672	145,267	14,490

TURKEY TRANSPLANTS

Merriam's turkeys are trapped from existing wild populations and transplanted to areas with favorable turkey habitat, normally in cooperation with volunteers from the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) (Figure 2). Each new turkey release project is initiated with a biological evaluation of habitat suitability followed by an environmental assessment of the overall project and approval by the FWP Commission. Also as part of the process, FWP secures agreements from adjacent landowners that may be potentially affected by expanding turkey populations. The consent forms also confirm the landowner's intent to allow public turkey hunting. Supplemental releases may also occur but require an evaluation that considers the history of previous releases and identifies justifications that warrant supplementing existing populations. Table 4 summarizes turkey transplants that occurred in 2009. No turkey transplants occurred in 2010.